

Chapter one

The flakes fell like bullets, hard and straight, bouncing off the banks of frozen snow as if they were grains of salt. Nightfall usually drew to Washington Square shady individuals who confabulated together in small huddles, yelling and laughing coarsely as they sought young kids to lure in, murmuring and sniffing as they stuffed strange little bags into their pockets, in their eyes the look of those who are not afraid of badges or cop cars. Yet the powerful and imperious gusts of wind that evening had kept them away.

New Year's was two days past and the snow that covered the park in the heart of Greenwich Village was growing thicker by the hour. It slipped between the foliage and shrubs, settled on the benches, draped itself on the hillocks, stretched itself out along the deserted paths that led to Bleecker Street or West Fourth. There was no sound except for the biting whistle of the storm, like a kind of harmony vibrating in the air. A streetlight gave off intermittent illumination as it attempted to stay lit, until suddenly its light bulb cracked and the glass fell to the ground together with the snow, flakes and fragments joining the inches of whiteness that already concealed the chessboards engraved on the tables. It was then, in that unnaturally still atmosphere, that there came the sound of someone breathing hard.

It was a kid. He was bent over, hands on knees, clinging to his soaked and torn jeans as he tried to catch his breath, but his position had catapulted his backpack up over his neck, forcing his head even further down and causing him to lose his round glasses with frames so slender they were almost non-existent and one of the temples repaired with tape. The little boy could still see – a little less, but he could see - so he reached out to retrieve the glasses with an assertive gesture. How many times had his mother begged him to take care of them? A new pair would mean a lot of hard work, and the ones he had couldn't endure much more patching up. It would be unfair to say that he didn't look after them, but when he least expected it they kept jumping away from his face as if they had a life of their own.

Trying to slow his breathing, the boy stood up. Carefully, he rearranged his

glasses on his face.

"Stay where you're supposed to be."

From the fog of swirling snow that filled the circular clearing, two frail and bony legs wrapped in rough, paint-stained canvas emerged. A thin old black man huddled inside a blue baseball jacket winced and then walked over towards the boy. With a restless expression, he scrutinized him from head to toe: that mixed-race kid, his dark curly hair covered in snow, was standing in the eye of the storm in the middle of Washington Square. Despite the bitter cold, he was wearing a very light coat, beneath which a white T-shirt and a grey hooded sweatshirt could be seen. That rebellious hair would never accommodate a cap, but he did have a pair of gloves: they had fallen out of his pockets and lay, hand in hand, a few steps away from his sodden trainers.

His face was hollow, exhausted, frightened and resolute – his compact, peanut-like nose took in air but the cold and haste meant his fleshy mouth let twice as much back out. The old man studied him and the boy, his eyes candid and fierce droplets of green and brown, held his gaze. The two remained like that for a moment, like duelists. Then the boy ran a hand over his forehead to brush away the heavy curls and blinked. The corners of his mouth lifted and his frozen hands clenched into two fists. In the winter twilight engulfed by the storm, he said in a quavering voice, "So will you teach me to play chess?"

"You'd die of cold, and so would I. I don't see the point of that. Come on."

The old man gestured for him to follow him, but the boy just crossed his arms and hunched over, to hold inside the little heat that his body was still giving off after the effort of running there.

"Don't you want a slice of pizza?"

The old man started to walk away but, hearing no movement from behind him, stopped immediately. As if even his thoughts were frozen, the boy was still there, at the entrance to the clearing with the chessboards in Washington Square Park.

"Okay, if you want to freeze to death, be my guest. I'm going to wait the storm out."

The old man came back and in three long strides was in front of him. He yanked the boy forward by the collar and then gave him a shove between the shoulder blades.

The two now walked side by side with a mechanical gait, swinging their arms and spreading their legs wide so as not to slip. They turned onto Sullivan Street, skirted the university's giant bookstore, and emerged onto West Third Street. The storm forced them to squint, and it was easy to lose your sense of direction. The streets all looked the same, and so did the avenues. You could barely recognize some of the signs that creaked, banged against shutters or swung around madly. The stinking, unhealthy air of downtown Manhattan, which high above them swallowed up the tops of the skyscrapers, was as if purified. Central Park looked like some vast ghost: the oaks and elms were still visible but the smaller trees had vanished under the weight of the snow. Swallowed up by the storm, the frozen lake on 86th Street was invisible, and the chirping of the birds had given way to the rustling of the foliage. Normally, there was only one moment of the year when you could listen to the silence of civilisation here: the night of the 24th of December. A dreamlike, Kafkaesque silence, with no one on the streets and avenues, very few cars, no chatter or sound of footsteps. Nothing at all except the quiet New York has never coveted and which immediately vanishes like a fragile memory. But that day, the second of the year, everyone had hurried home, bumping into one another without apologizing, every man for himself. The city felt full of little families hunkered up in every corner, tables laid behind the closed curtains, books open on the armchairs and crass commercials blasting out of TVs. It was the most populous island on the planet and yet not a whisper was to be heard, only the echoes of the sirens of fire engines as they sped up to the river and immediately turned off by the Hudson, which shook its shores as it rose and fell and then lifted its chest again, as if engaged in a quarrel with the East River which, on the other side, flanked Queens and the Bronx.

With difficulty, the old man and the boy finally reached Ben's, the pizzeria on Sixth Avenue. It was the size of a cellar and you could eat there for a dollar - luckily, as no more than that would be forthcoming if they rummaged in their

pockets. The owner whose name was on the sign was a guarantee: with four children, all of school age, nothing could convince him to keep the shutters down. The two entered, shutting out the gusts of wind and the snow behind them, stamped their feet and smelled with relief the odours of food.

"What are you doing out in this weather, Walter?" said Ben from behind the counter, a tea towel over one shoulder and another inside the glass he was drying.

"I had an appointment," replied the old man, taking his place on one of the stools that looked out of the window.

Ben glanced at the boy. "You want a slice to warm you up?"

"Of course we want a slice, what do you think we came here for?"

"I see you're in your usual good mood," grinned Ben.

"A slice, you ugly tightwad. One slice. I only have one dollar."

"Who's he? Uncle Carl's grandson?"

The little boy stood looking up at Ben, studying him, but Walter gave him a pat on the shoulder to tell him to sit down.

"No, Uncle Carl's grandson has been in juvenile hall for a while now. This here is a kid with no brains that I met in Washington Square."

The little boy perched on the stool, rested his elbows on the countertop that served as a table and, nodding, pressed his nose against his folded forearms.

Apart from the two unexpected guests and Ben, who was busy tidying up and squaring the day's accounts, there was no one else there. The place didn't offer elegant, pleasant-smelling spaces or refined designer furnishings: it was a cramped room that reeked of bleach, had a naked light bulb for illumination and a postcard of a 1996 starry night at Niagara Falls, Canadian side, as its only decoration. But Ben always welcomed into his little cockroach-infested sanctuary anyone who arrived, hungry and frozen from the storm, never denying them a slice of cold pizza. On credit.

"So, Martin? You gonna tell me what the hell were you doing all alone in Washington Square?"

The boy's eyes widened in disbelief.

"How'd you know my name?"

"Your backpack, genius."

Martin looked over his right shoulder and then over his left, and saw the card with his name and surname hanging from the shoulder strap. It was still there from summer camp.

"You'd have had to tell me it sooner or later, right?"

Martin thought for a moment before replying, "So are you going to teach me to play chess or not?"

"What makes you think I know how?"

"I saw you. Three days ago you were at one of those tables playing with an Indian kid who was there with his mom and his grandma and a whole load of other kids. Maybe they were his cousins, or his brothers and sisters. I don't know. But there was a ton of them."

"You got a quick eye," smiled Walter as Ben reappeared from the small backroom. "And does your mother know that you go around minding other people's business?"

"No."

Ben came over with two slices of pepperoni pizza freshly reheated in the microwave. They lay on two paper plates with ribbed edges.

"Ketchup? Mayonnaise? I got some leftover fries too. You want something to drink or you'd rather die of thirst?"

"There was no need for that, Ben."

"For what?"

"The second slice."

"That was leftover too."

Walter shook his head. "Thanks. That way the brat can eat too."

"It ain't free. It's on your tab, I told you."

"Figures," snorted Walter. "Thought for a moment you were having an attack of generosity."

"When you have a family to feed, your generosity goes in the fryer with the frozen fries as soon as the first customer enters. So, what are you drinking?"

"A Coke for him, a Bud for me."

"I'll put it on your tab."

Walter devoured his slice, which he discovered was only warm and not hot.

Martin instead held his raised for a while, dangling the tip like a fisherman with a line, then took a timid bite.

"Christ, Walter, you finished it already?" said Ben, returning with the drinks.

The old man opened Martin's can and placed it in front of him, next to his plate. The boy immediately took a long sip. He seemed to be more hungry than thirsty.

"I do know how to play chess," Walter said finally, and Martin straightened up, put down his pizza and raised his eyebrow expectantly. "But I'm not a teacher."

"What does that mean? If you know how to play it, you know how to teach it."

"It's not the same thing."

"So what about the Indian kid?"

"I wasn't teaching him - we were playing. For money. You always need money here in New York. Not everyone'll give you credit like Ben!"

Ben shot him a look from behind the counter.

"I want to learn how to play chess."

"I figured that from the way you came to Washington Square today. But I play, I don't teach."

"I can pay you."

"What?"

"I'll pay you."

"And your mother doesn't know you're here."

"What's that got to do with it?"

The old man said nothing.

"I didn't steal the money."

Walter turned to look him in the face.

"How old are you?"

"We got a deal?" Martin insisted.

"No."

"Ten dollars an hour."

"No."

"Twenty."

"No."

"Thirty."

"Thirty dollars a lesson?"

"That's all I got."

"Where'd you get the money?"

"It's a secret."

"Bullshit. If we're going to do business, you and I don't get to have secrets."

Martin looked outside. A yellow cab was ploughing along the avenue, perhaps in search of unfortunate potential clients.

"Ok," he sighed, lifting the mended temple of his glasses. "Sometimes I help my classmates. Math, science, history..."

"Ah!" exclaimed Walter, pointing his finger at him. "So you're the teacher here."

"No, I just help with homework."

"Twenty dollars an hour and I don't give credit," said Walter, grabbing the slice of pizza Martin had only taken a bite from. He wolfed it down until there

was nothing left but the crust, which he tossed onto the plate under the boy's face, then took a gulp of beer, swallowing loudly, his eyes on Martin's. He seemed to be trying to scare him.

A minute later, Ben appeared with another slice that he put directly into the boy's hands to prevent it falling into the dark cavern of Walter's appetite, but Martin couldn't eat more than half of it: Ben was a good guy and a family man, and wasn't going to note that slice down on his tab, but it was still really bad. Thin, doughy and tasteless, with an insubstantial crust of mozzarella that came away all at once at the first bite, leaving the pasta orphaned even of the tomato sauce. For a dollar, though, it was as good a way as any to calm your hunger.

"So is it a deal?"

Martin held out his hand solemnly, expecting a strong and honest handshake, but Walter just drained what was left of the Bud and patted him twice on the shoulder.

"See you tomorrow at six. And if you're five minutes late, don't bother showing up again."

The storm seemed finally to be abating and, wrapped up as well as he was able, the boy walked with light steps along the Avenue of the Americas. When he turned off into the subway, he was still mulling over the appointment for the following day. Brooklyn to Manhattan was a fair way. He had to make sure he arrived on time.

Martin descended the stairs more carefully than if he were walking barefoot on shards of glass and rid himself of the slice of pizza Ben had given him before letting him leave. "God bless you!" shouted the toothless man sitting behind a shabby grey keyboard, before starting to play again.

Martin just turned around, paid his fare and went through the turnstile, discovering that he would have to wait about twenty minutes for a train. From his backpack he pulled out the orange sheet that had caught his eye in Sunday's post – he unfolded it, reread it, then folded it back up and hid it in his pocket to keep it close and safe.

The subway loudspeaker croaked that the train would be delayed another few

minutes - perhaps the snow had caused a breakdown. Martin shrugged and this time took from his backpack an old edition of the *Iliad* with so many page corners folded over that it was doubled in thickness. The cover of the black and orange paperback upon which were the words *The Story of Achilles* was wrapped in cellophane. Taken from the third book, page 111: "*Someone who has seen / in the mountain forest horrid serpent / leaps back, and flees by the cliff / with trembling fear and white face, / such among the hosts of the proud Teucrians, / the tremendous wrath of the son of Atreus, / the handsome coward demoted.*"

He went no further - the verses were already speaking to him. He mustn't be afraid of anything, he told himself. Even being a coward was a luxury that was not permitted. After all, he thought, it was a matter of spending a few hours playing chess in a pretty square packed with tourists and university students with a stranger named Walter. That wasn't too much if, in exchange, it gave him a way out. A man must accept the challenges that fate presents him and fight with his best helmet on his head, and that was what Martin considered himself: a man. Not a creature on the threshold of adolescence. And it wasn't the bullies upstairs who pulled his backpack from his back and threw it from one to another like a basketball, nor the classmates who called him "weirdo" for the way he kept close to the wall when, shy and taciturn, he walked down the hall, a different book under his arm each time. Him, who loved to read in solitude in the stolen minutes between one class and another while his classmates were fooling around, confessing their secrets and wolfing down snacks. Martin Gale didn't feel like the others - he had his business to take care of and couldn't afford any distractions. He felt an innate, ancient responsibility bubbling up inside him: he had the impression that his soul, together with his body, was expanding. And he wanted to be ready. Walter was without doubt a jailbird, but Martin would stand up to him. And as for the money, he already had a few dozen dollars to spare.

The first lesson, in any case, was organised. His only worry remained the time. He should have objected: six in the evening was too late. Seeing him leave just before dinner would make his mother suspicious, but Martin was already

planning to lock his bedroom door and go out the back way. Otherwise he could use the excuse of little Tom: Tom wasn't doing so great at school lately and he needed Martin's help. There's always a solution, Martin told himself. He would get the boat back to shore. He would manage it.

Every now and then he lost himself in the memory of August afternoons at Coney Island, with him and his mother chasing the kite they'd built with their own hands after eating a giant vanilla and chocolate ice cream. Not content with that, once they had even created a grandiose marble track on the beach: it was like a citadel, with two sharp bends, a small bridge and a sort of spiral at the top complete with flag. That day the ocean had been rough and the wind salty and ferocious. The retreating waves dragged everything away with them, and few were willing to face their fury. Martin wanted to try, but as soon as he had felt the sand crumble beneath his feet and his ankles grasped in a soft grip, he had stared around him, eyes wide, while his breathing fragmented into a myriad of tiny gasps, and had seen no one except his mother. Leah ran over to him and, one palm in the foam of the ocean and the other around the little boy's waist, reassured him. And that maternal touch, in Martin's imagination, was as if she had calmed even the Atlantic.

Distant and strange, those memories echoed in his mind. The metallic voice of the subway warned that the train was on its way. Martin rubbed his eye with his fist. He hadn't read much - the page had opened up his thoughts. Suddenly he thought of buying a chessboard, but that would cost at least another thirty dollars, which would mean selling two or three reports on dinosaurs - Tom had already asked for one - and studying hard. He would find what he needed at the Natural History Museum on 81st Street. Deep down, Martin often fantasised about a planet dominated by those huge ruthless reptiles whose fossils could be admired in its display cases. Sometimes he would slip past the museum security and wait to watch the sun to drop behind the buildings of the Upper West Side. He was looking forward to Sunday, perhaps his mother would be free for a hot dog at the museum entrance.

The screeching of the brakes forced him to plug his ears. Martin didn't like loud noises. Music, on the other hand, he loved, even when it was loud. With

Achilles under his arm, he grasped the shoulder straps of his backpack and peered at his watch: it was very late, well beyond the time he usually got home. The doors opened and closed. This time he would need a plausible excuse if he didn't want to get grounded.